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LESSER LITERARY LIGHTS

BY MRS. W. S. COURTNEY

WHILST much has been written about the women novelists of the early nineteenth century, comparatively slight attention has been paid to its poetesses. It is true that most of their reputations died deservedly almost as soon as they were born and that not one of them can be mentioned in the same breath as their contemporaries, Miss Austen and Miss Burney. Who now, except the *Dictionary of National Biography*, remembers Maria Jane Jewsbury, or Caroline Bowles except that late in life she became Mrs. Southey? And even the *Dictionary* has forgotten Miss S. Evance (was she Sarah, Susanna, or Selina?), whose "earliest productions" were given to an indifferent world by her friend, Mr. James Clarke of Organford in Dorset. Charlotte Smith, whose "mournful Sonnets" he quotes as affording some sanction for Miss Evance's predilection for "indulging the petrifying gloom of lonely wretchedness, or the deep horror of wild despair," is less obscure, and her reasons for indulging in gloom, as far as we know, are better founded. But probably not one in twenty modern readers has so much as heard of her, though she is included in Mrs. Ellwood's *Literary Ladies* (1843) and the *Dictionary* gives her four columns.

One versifier there was, however, even in the days of George IV, deserving of more than a passing mention in any chronicle of women poets. She pales before the greater lights of the middle of the century, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and—brightest of all—Christina Rossetti, a poet worthy to take her place amongst poets without tacking any feminine termination to the word. But Felicia Hemans—and for that matter Caroline Bowles and Charlotte Smith at their best—had the poet's sensibility, if they lacked the true poet's power of giving it expression.

Their failure was due in a great measure to absence of the critical spirit. They were at no trouble to select. Once recognized as professional poets, they seem to have felt bound to be always committing effusions to paper. They could let no event occur, and no guest arrive or depart, without addressing to it, him, or her, the appropriate copy of verses.

This is especially true of Mrs. Hemans, whose forty years of life yielded poetic material to fill seven volumes, all promptly and for the most part justly forgotten except a few ballads and lyrics, which show what she might have done, had she developed the selective instinct of the true artist. To do her justice, she knew this, and late in life she regretted the facility, "amounting almost to improvisation," which poured out those *Songs of the Domestic Affections*, as well as the domestic necessities which impelled her to publish. But if only she had known the difference between the opening of the *Pilgrim Fathers'*:

The breaking waves dashed high
On a stern and rock-bound coast
And the woods against a stormy sky
Their giant branches tossed.

and the beginning of *The Land of Dreams*:

O spirit-land! thou land of dreams!
A world thou art of mysterious gleams.

she had been a truer poet.

She lived in an age reticent as regards its women. Such biographies of her as were written by her sister, Mrs. Hughes, and her friend, Henry F. Chorley, tells us little that is intimate. We know only that she was the fourth child of a Liverpool merchant named Browne, of good Irish lineage—he could claim kinship with the Marquesses of Sligo—and a mother half Italian and half German, whose old Venetian surname of Veniero had been teutonized into Wagner. It was a promising racial mixture. There was nothing British about Felicia Dorothea Browne except her earliest environment, and even that soon changed to the romantic northern shores of Wales, whither her father moved his family when she was but five years old. The most susceptible years of her childhood were spent at Grwyth, not far from Abergele in Denbighshire, in an old

solitary, rambling house close to the sea and shut off from the land by a chain of rocky hills.

She seems to have been a remarkable child, remarkable not only for her talents but for her radiant beauty. About that there were no two opinions. All who remember her in her youth speak of her loveliness both as a child and as a young girl, and her portraits show that she retained much of this beauty even when ill-health had taken the gold from her hair and the color from her cheeks. She was also remarkable for her memory. "Why, Felice, you cannot have read that," a friend once exclaimed to the child of eight. "Oh, yes I have and I will repeat it to you," and proof positive followed. Her sister says that often when she seemed to be merely fluttering the leaves of the book, it would be found that she had not only read its contents but had committed them to memory. A devoted mother, herself an accomplished woman and particularly fond of reading aloud, brought the child up in an atmosphere of literature. Felicia had a natural gift for languages and learned readily French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and in later life German, and amongst her poems are to be found translations in verse from all these literatures. She was also not ignorant of Latin. And she was both musical and skilled with her pencil. No wonder that in the first freshness of her beauty, and fired by enthusiasm for martial deeds, she captivated her brother's friend, Capt. Hemans, when she was only sixteen, and married him three years later.

Before that time she was already winning recognition as a poet. Her first volume of verse appeared at fourteen. It was unkindly noticed in some review, and she was much upset; but she soon recovered and took to writing again, this time a poem on England and Spain. It was the period of the Peninsular War. Both her brother and her future husband were fighting in Spain; but her main interests were nearer home, and her second volume of poems was entitled *The Domestic Affections, and other Poems*.

Affectionate and devoted as Felicia was in all other relations of life, for some unexplained reason she was unhappy in her marriage. She herself never drew back the veil which hid from the world the reason why, after some years of wedded life and the birth of five sons, she and her husband practically separated and lived the rest of their lives apart. They had begun life together at Daventry near

Northampton. After a year they came to live with Felicia's mother at Bromwylfa in Flintshire. Five years later Captain Hemans went to Italy "for the sake of his health," impaired by fever during his military service. He settled in Rome and he never returned, and his wife, whose fifth son was born shortly afterwards, was apparently content to have it so, for she seems to have made no effort to rejoin him, though she continued to correspond with him and to consult him about his boys, two of whom went to him later on.

It is impossible not to speculate as to the reasons for this separation. It might have been the proverbial mother-in-law; but Felicia's mother, to whom she was tenderly devoted, is described as a woman of uncommon sense and deep piety, not, one would imagine, likely to be a disturber of domestic peace, or inclined to think lightly of wifely duties. Moreover, joint establishments of two generations were common enough in England then, as common as they are still in France. Perhaps it was a spirit of detachment born of the war. Something of the kind is in the air now. Women have perforce learned during the last five years to manage their own lives and to bring up their children without masculine assistance. They had the same experience during the Napoleonic wars; they may have learned the same lesson that men, though no doubt desirable, are by no means indispensable. Any way, whatever grief the separation may have caused her, it did not embitter an essentially sunny nature. She herself was fond of quoting Mlle. de L'Esplanasse's saying, "*Un grand chagrin tue tout le reste*," and she lived up to it in so far as she never allowed herself to be vexed by unkind criticism, or pernicious gossip.

For the rest her life was uneventful. She went once to London as a child of eleven but never again. After she had achieved reputation as a poet she paid visits to Scotland, where she made friends with Sir Walter Scott, and to the Lake country, where she met Wordsworth and addressed a poem to him. She maintained an affectionate correspondence with Miss Mitford, Mary Howitt, Maria Jewsbury, Joanna Baillie and others, and towards the end of her life she went to live in Ireland, where she died.

In America her poems had considerable success, as befitted the writer of *The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers*. Dr. Bancroft, author of the *History of the United States*, was one of her correspondents; but the tribute she most

valued was an entirely unsolicited letter from Professor Andrews Norton, the father of Charles Eliot Norton, telling her that a complete edition of her works was wished for in Boston.

This was in 1825. At that date she had already published the two volumes mentioned, *Tales and Historic Scenes*, *The Sceptic*, a couple of tragedies, *Welsh Melodies*, *Dartmoor*, and *Belshazzar's Feast*, the last one of her most ambitious efforts and one of the more successful. The tragedies did not come to much. Like most writers of the period she had theatrical ambitions, and she did actually succeed in getting *The Vespers of Palermo* accepted, paid for, and staged by Kemble at Covent Garden. But it proved "all but a failure" and was played only once. Later it was produced in Edinburgh, with some success; but the stage was not her *métier*, and she had to recognize this truth. *Lays of Many Lands*, the result of studying Herder, appeared in 1826, *Records of Woman* in 1828 and *Songs of the Affections* in 1830. By that time her Welsh home had been broken up, her mother was dead, her sister married and her brother removed to Ireland. She lived for a time at Wavertree, near Liverpool; but it did not suit her health, and she did not care for its society. She went to Dublin to be near her brother, and there she published *Hymns for Childhood*, *National Lyrics*, and *Scenes and Hymns of Life*.

The titles of these volumes must, to American readers especially, recall their Longfellow, a poet whom Mrs. Hemans immediately preceded and with whom she has much in common. Compare, for instance, her *Casabianca* with his *Wreck of the Hesperus*, and then both of them with Browning's *Incident of the French Camp* to see how modern poetry has gained in directness of expression. Or again compare her *Forest Sanctuary* with his *Evangeline*; in narrative poetry the advantage is with Longfellow. But in sound, if not in sentiment, his *Psalm of Life* is commonplace compared to her *Hour of Death*.

Leaves have their time to fall,
And flowers to wither at the north wind's breath,
And stars to set—but all,
Thou hast *all* seasons for thine own, O Death!

This has the true note of a dirge, just as the last stanza of her *Invocation* breathes the spirit of silence:

No voice is on the air of night,
Through folded leaves no murmurs creep,
Nor star nor moonbeam's trembling light
Falls on the placid brow of sleep.
Descend, bright visions! from your airy bower:
Dark, silent, solemn, is your favorite hour.

Not very profound, perhaps; but we do not go to Mrs. Hemans, or to Longfellow for that matter, for profundity of thought. We go to her for sensitive femininity, for perception of natural beauty, for heroic sentiment, for graceful and tender tributes to "the domestic affections." And at her best, we do not go to her in vain. She wrote a great deal too much, but so did Wordsworth. Like him she has her *longueurs*; there are pages and pages which we can spare. Sometimes the domestic affections descend to mere banality as in *The Homes of England*; but sometimes, too, they sound a note of true tenderness as in *The Graves of a Household*. And to appraise her at her true worth, we have to look back to the poetic tradition which nurtured her, and to compare her with contemporary poets both of her own sex and of the other.

To begin with, she was a contemporary of Byron, but also of Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth—in other words in between the romantic and the natural schools of poetry. She was clearly influenced by Cowper—her *Charmed Picture* was definitely occasioned by reading his lines to his Mother's picture, and many of her "occasional" verses have something of his felicity. She had been bred in the traditions of classical elegance, illustrated by such contemporary poets as Samuel Rogers and Thomas Campbell. She has a good deal of affinity with Campbell both in treatment and choice of subjects. She touches Byron only in so far as she shares with him the idea that there are subjects in themselves poetical, instead of thinking with Wordsworth and Coleridge that poetry resides in the treatment, not the subject. Consequently she is sometimes too ambitious. She is less concerned with what she has to say than with what, given the subject chosen, ought to be said. And in a sense she was too cultivated. The result, to borrow a phrase of Mr. Courthope's originally applied to Rogers, was that she brought "a tasteful mind cultivated by reading and devoid of inspiration" to bear upon subjects, such as Belshazzar's Feast, which, if dealt with at all by a modern

poet, should be dealt with greatly. She could only deal with them adequately, sometimes scarcely that. But when she was taking herself less seriously, she could achieve a simple directness worthy of Wordsworth. *Christ Stilling the Tempest* is a good example:

Fear was within the tossing bark
When stormy winds grew loud
And waves came rolling high and dark
And the tall mast was bowed.

And men stood breathless in their dread
And baffled in their skill;
But One was there, who rose and said
To the wild sea—*Be still!*

This was very different from the description of Belshazzar's revel,

And He who sleeps not heard the elated throng,
In mirth that plays with thunderbolts, defy
The Rock of Zion! Fill the nectar high,
High in the cups of consecrated gold!

And so on, and so on. One is sorry sometimes that she did not write prose for her letters have this same charm of simplicity, combined with a vivacity which does not appear in her verse. "I fear I shall not have any evening that I can quite call my own," she writes to a Mr. L—, "until Friday or Saturday of next week, on either of which it will give me great pleasure to receive you . . . I think I shall not ask any 'human mortals,' as Titania calls them, to meet you, unless you *particularly wish* for the society of—— who so edified us in the concert room. Pray do not betray me, but I really have been haunted ever since that awful hour (when she had been asked to write an Ode to Music) . . . I am under a humiliating impression of having actually composed in my sleep, during the influence of this deadly spell, four lines, beginning 'Enchanting nymph,' but of the remainder *non mi ricordo* . . . I have an ominous feeling, too, that we are destined to meet again, and that 'the words of fear' will again be solemnly uttered—if so, I am sure they will drive me to some deed worthy of the Tragic Muse herself." And, to a woman friend—"I have been very ill used in several ways since I saw you. Here is a great book on Phrenology which a gentleman has just sent me and expects that I shall *read!* People really do take me for a sort of literary ogress, I think, or something like the sailor's definition of an epicure, 'a person that can

eat *anything* ' . . . And imagine some of my American friends having actually sent me several copies of a Tract, audaciously calling itself ' A Sermon on Small Sins.' Did you ever know anything so scurrilous and personal? ' Small sins ' to *me*, who am little better than a grown-up Rosamond (Miss Edgeworth's), who constantly lie in bed till it is too late to get up early, break my needles (when I use any), leave my keys among my necklaces, answer all my amusing letters first and leave the others to their fate; in short, regularly commit small sins enough every day to roll up into one great, immense, *frightful* one at the end of it! "

* * * *

But if a great deal of her verse would have been better in prose, that is even truer of Caroline Bowles, whose most pretentious poem, *The Birthday*, is not only prosaic but of an infantile dullness:

Unwelcome hour, I ween, that tied me down
Restless, reluctant, to the sempstress' task!
Sight horrible to me, th'allotted seam
Of stubborn Irish, or more hateful length
Of handkerchief, with folded edge tacked down
All to be hemmed; ay *selvidge sides* and all.
And so they were in tedious course of time.

But not more tedious than the ninety-six pages of drivel, which relate how " kindest care, Considerate of my long, hot, dusty walk " took off my hat and tippet and gave me a chair and told me to sit and rest till tea-time, with other such simple nursery precautions.

There are better things in the volume of her *Poetical Works*, verses to her dog, Ranger, and a poem *To a Dying Infant* (she is much concerned all through with death), sincere both in feeling and expression and not without poetic dignity:

Sleep, little Baby! sleep!
Not in thy cradle bed,
Not on thy mother's breast
Henceforth shall be thy rest,
But with the quiet dead.

* * *

And then to lie and weep
And think the livelong night—
Feeding thine own distress
With accurate greediness—
Of every past delight

Of all his winning ways,
His pretty, playful smiles,
His joy at sight of thee,
His tricks, his mimicry,
And all his little wiles.

But then follow such lines as

Oh! these are recollections
Round mothers' hearts that cling!

which are pure prose both in form and feeling, and show that she did not know the difference.

She must have read her Mrs. Hemans, for in a poem *To the Sweet-scented Cyclamen* occur these stanzas:

Ay, shadows all—gone every face
I loved to look upon
Hushed every strain I loved to hear,
Or sounding in a distant ear—
All gone!—all gone!—all gone!

Some far away in other lands—
In this some worse than dead—
Some in their graves laid quietly—
One, slumbering in the deep, deep sea—
All gone!—all lost!—all fled!

Mrs. Hemans had phrased much the same lament in *The Graves of a Household*, only she phrased it better and less pretentiously.

* * * *

But the palm for pretentiousness must be awarded to Miss S. Evance. Like Caroline Bowles she is greatly concerned with death, which with her becomes "the Tomb," and we hear a great deal about "Pale Disappointment," "dark Despair" and "dismal cries of woe." These, strange to relate, seem to be uttered by fairies disturbed by the dawn and fluttering off

To the sequestered spot where low is laid
The form of Adela—a village maid,
Who torn with pangs of unrequited love,
Plung'd in the stream that wanders thro' the grove.
Her grave in rude unhallow'd ground was laid,
Without one rite to sooth her hovering shade;

so that the fairies had to try and soothe it by flinging "pale flow'rets" until "the cock crows loud" and, listening to "the warning sound," the fairies "fly with one doleful shriek that echoes round." All this is in a poem called *The Glowworm* and apparently recounts his experiences as he

lies upon a violet bank. There are other more portentous utterances, such as a Sonnet addressed to Despair, which begins,

Pale ruthless Demon! terrible Despair,
and another, "written near the sea," which talks about "Ocean's deep tempestuous roar" and goes on to say that far more wild is the soul's tumult:

More turbulent the feelings tossing there;
For every hope is blasted by Despair
And clouds of darkness o'er my prospects roll.

There were, however, brighter moments, and in some of them Miss Evance makes incursions into natural history and tells us about the "faint imploring cry" of the Fly, which is adjured to "leave the haunt of man" and take its flight to

Where heathy mountains wild arise,
Where sun-beams ever warm and bright
Serenely gleam from cloudless skies,
Where lovely flow'rets lift their heads,
And to the gale soft fragrance give;
Where Nature every beauty spreads—
There sip each sweet—and gaily live.

which would be all very well, if the fly were a bee; but where is the garbage for it to feed upon?

Miss Evance is very scrupulous in making her elisions. Violets are generally vi'lets, just as flowers are flow'rets. And she has studied her Milton to some purpose, as when she apostrophises Hope to "illuminate" her "fleeting transient day":

Not deckt in sweet alluring smiles
Not with thy train of sportive wiles;
But come with looks benignly grave,
And from despair my bosom save;
Gild with thy beams this dark oppressive gloom,
And point with steady hand unto the peaceful tomb.

We are back at that tomb even when it is Hope that is in question. There are other Miltonic touches, as in the *Canzonette*, which would have us find pleasure, "not in Fashion's gilded fane"

But in some still secluded spot,
Where Innocence has raised her cot,
And meek-eyed Peace delights t'appear,
While calm Contentment lingers near
With holy Piety;

only—and this is Evantic, not Miltonic—

In such a scene my quiet mind
Feels soothed, exalted and refined.

Miss Evance is best when she is Miltonic. She is worst when she is moralizing, or elegiac, as in the poem *To Miss Burton*:

But here that gentle form of thine
I never more shall view;
Thy last farewell of love is mine—
Maria, oh—adieu.
Prepar'd as thou art to depart,
I should not wish thy stay;
Be still, my weak, my throbbing heart!
Ye tears—away, away.

The 'feeling heart,' indeed, is part of her religion.

The God of Nature—he alone,
Who form'd the feeling heart, and knows
Each secret throb—each stifled groan—
He can relieve its mighty woes.

It is a comfort to know that there were other moments when her emotions were of a gentler order and the redbreast could inspire her with "a wish of emulative love," or when she quitted "the social throng" with sighs for the loss of Mr. ——'s mild manners.

Warm'd by benevolence so kind;
That conversation ever sweet
Improving, elegant, refin'd!

The little volume—it is only one hundred and thirty-one pages—ends appropriately with a poem *To Sensibility*:

Ah! child of sensibility!
The cold world nothing knows of thee!

And apparently the world has been content to know nothing more of Miss Evance.

* * * *

There is little space left for Charlotte Smith; but she was more novelist than poet. She did, however, publish two thin volumes of *Elegiac Sonnets*, which ran into nine editions and were not without merit. She seems to have been as precocious a child as Felicia Browne and even more unfortunately married, for her husband had a passion for expensive and futile undertakings, and they had twelve children to support. To add to her troubles, the family were involved in interminable litigation by the grandfather's obstinacy in drawing up his own will, a most voluminous docu-

ment profiting no one except the lawyers. She alludes to these difficulties with some bitterness in the preface to a later edition of her Sonnets; but the sadness of the sonnets themselves sprang mainly from grief at the loss of her eldest boy. "When in the beech woods of Hampshire I first struck the chords of the melancholy lyre, its notes were never intended for the public ear; it was unaffected sorrow drew them forth; I wrote mournfully because I was unhappy!"

"Unaffected" is the word which best describes her poetry. It is simple and sincere and achieves considerable felicity of expression:

Ah! then, how dear the Muse's favors cost,
If those paint sorrow best—who feel it most!

And she has a tender appreciation of nature:

Again the wood, and long-withdrawing vale,
In many a tint of tender green are drest,
Where the young leaves unfolding, scarce conceal
Beneath their early shade, the half formed nest
Of finch or woodlark; and the primrose pale,
And lavish cowslip, wildly scattered round,
Give their sweet spirits to the sighing gale.

Still it says a good deal for the general appreciation of poetry in 1789 that "so many noble, literary and respectable" people were prepared to subscribe for copies of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, which by that year had run into five editions and eventually reached nine. Charlotte Smith finally left her husband and supported herself and her children mainly by her pen; but as the rest of her work was prose fiction or books for young people (*Rural Walks*, *Minor Morals* and the like), she has no further place in a chronicle of poetesses.

MRS. W. S. COURTNEY.